

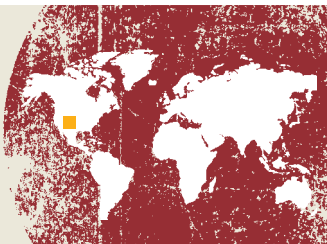


Utah, USA

 Wild West landscapes, indigenous rock art and outdoor activities galore

 Fly London-Salt Lake City (from 11 hrs); hire a car: Canyonlands is a 4.5 hour drive

 Go in autumn, for great colours



“U-tah!”

Hoodoos - slim chimneys of rock - frame the view in Chesler Park, deep in the Needles area of Canyonlands



HOODOO MAGIC

Weird geology, wild rivers, tight canyons and epic roads –
Utah is the place for a rocking self-drive adventure

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rogress was slow. The wall of red rock pressed tight against my chest, another hard against my back, making it difficult to move. The cold water

lining the canyon floor was waist deep.

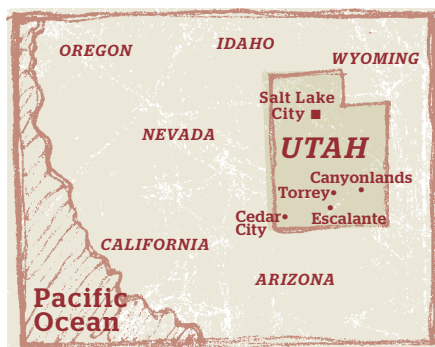
“Forwards on, canyoneers,” came the encouraging call from Rick, our guide, at the back. “It’s about to get real pretty up here.”

I emptied my lungs of air for the extra inch of space it gave me and stretched an arm out, dragging my body by the fingertips through the narrow slot canyon and towards the thin strip of blue sky overhead.

The canyon water seeped out of my boots onto the rock of the Escalante Desert. True to Rick’s word, the tight slot had opened out into a winding corridor of striped red, pink and black rock, with smooth curves and ridges that had been sculpted by year-upon-year of water flow. It was like crawling around a giant artwork, Utah’s speciality being rock studies in colour, light and form.

Canyoneering was getting us right up close to the desert’s rock formations. It was a test of agility and strength, but also a mental challenge: plotting a course up, through, under or over the tight spots and big drops, and then seeing if the body is equal to the idea.

The challenge is not without risk. It was in canyons like these that climber Aron Ralston became trapped in 2003 while canyoneering alone in Blue John Canyon, near Moab –



around 170km north-east from Escalante. Ralston famously spent five days at the bottom of a narrow slot canyon, his right arm pinned against the wall by a 360kg boulder that became dislodged while he was climbing. Fatigued, starving, dehydrated and knowing his chances of being rescued were slim (particularly because he hadn’t told anyone where he was going), he took the drastic last option available to free himself and save his own life: cutting off his own arm with a dull knife and a pair of pliers. He then rappelled down a 20m wall and hiked 10km through the desert to be rescued.

Ralston’s 127-hour ordeal, now the subject of *Slumdog Millionaire*-director Danny Boyle’s acclaimed new film, has made him famous around the world. But it certainly hasn’t made him a local hero here in Utah. “He knew the rule: you don’t go out on your own without telling anybody where you’re going,” one resident told me. “People think it’s rather odd for someone

who did something so stupid to get so much notoriety for it.”

Out in the canyons, you realise what a big mistake Ralston made. The wilderness is so vast and filled with hidden cracks, canyons, caves and overhangs that to be searching for a person without any idea of their location makes finding them virtually impossible. But the other thing you quickly understand here is the powerful draw of this Dalí-esque desert landscape, stretching out to the horizon in all directions with a panoply of buttes, mesas, mountains, canyons, fins, hoodoos, spires, towers, boulders and other bizarre colourful sandstone creations. An outdoor enthusiast’s paradise, it calls out to be explored.

Big skies, open roads

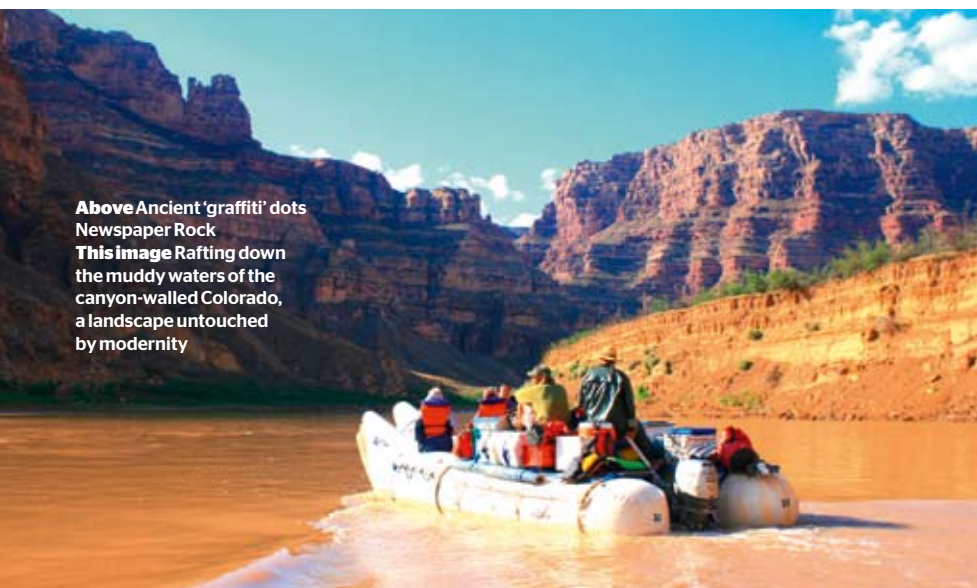
I’d come here to drive a loop around south-west Utah’s numerous national parks, to experience the state’s weird and wonderful geological features. My starting point, though, was Salt Lake City, the state’s laidback capital and global HQ for the Mormon Church (or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), with Temple Square the spiritual heart of the city. The Mormons came here in 1847, led by the controversial ‘Mormon Moses’ Brigham Young who declared, “This is the right place,” after a 1,600km exodus across the desert.

The state is still predominantly Mormon, and they exert a strong conservative influence on local politics, business and culture. But Utah’s far more welcoming than the dry, dour image many visitors might

From left

Gravity-defying rocks are common in Arches NP; a tight spot in Escalante; guide Rick leads hikers through the remote desert of Escalante, where once Anasazi Indians and cowboys roamed

'It was like crawling around a giant artwork, Utah's speciality being rock studies in colour, light and form'



Above Ancient 'graffiti' dots Newspaper Rock
This image Rafting down the muddy waters of the canyon-walled Colorado, a landscape untouched by modernity



'We scrambled to a 2,000-year-old Anasazi

◀ have in their heads. Excellent winter and summer sporting opportunities have attracted younger, more liberal outdoor enthusiasts to the region, especially the town of Moab. Formerly strict drinking laws have been relaxed and polygamy hasn't been legal since 1890.

The car loaded with CDs of 'big skies/open roads' music – Springsteen, Ennio Morricone, John Denver – I began the four-hour journey down to Moab. There was time on the way down to see a little of Canyonlands, a 1,366 sq km national park divided by the Green and Colorado rivers into three main areas: the Needles, the Maze and Island In The Sky. Viewpoints line the roads that cut through the park.

The epic vistas of layered red and green rock are, for my money, equal to the Grand Canyon – if anything, the winding Colorado

River has carved out a landscape here that's even more ragged and fascinating. I watched the sun set from Dead Horse Point, 1,800m above the Colorado.

Tough tyre tracks

It was still dark when I drove into the popular, often-crowded Arches National Park, home to the world's largest concentration of natural stone arches (with over 2,000 counted). After watching dawn's yellow rays light up an alien landscape of columns, canyon walls and, of course, arches, I hiked up to the park's most famous site, Delicate Arch, an easy walk over a slowly curving dome of rock. Warm morning sun saturated the rock of the iconic span, turning it a deep rusty orange.

Fuelled by a bowl of beer cheese soup at the Moab Brewery in town, I took on one of

Utah's greatest outdoor challenges: the Slickrock Bike Trail. Only 17km long, the course takes around four hours due to its many steep climbs and near-vertical drops over massive petrified sand dunes. It's a demanding technical ride, with lots of braking and shifting, but it's fun and the setting is one of a kind: rounded humps of rock framed by the La Sal Mountains, the Colorado River and the edge of Arches National Park. "Biking's just a great excuse to get out in the desert," Brian, my guide, explained. "It's beautiful, huh?"

I swapped guides early the next morning: 4WD expert Bill Foot was to take me deep into the remote areas of Canyonlands. We drove south to the Needles, only stopping to read the latest edition on Newspaper Rock, a wall of Native Indian petroglyphs carved into the black 'desert polish' coating the

This image Spectacular road-tripping en route to Zion NP
Right Taking on the challenge of Slickrock Bike Trail; Landscape Arch in Arches NP is thought to be the longest natural span in the world



Indian storehouse – there are hundreds here’

rock. The ride was bone-jarring, the grill of the bouncing vehicle pointing skywards as Bill climbed a steep rock staircase up Elephant Hill, tyre by tyre. “Now you see what these babies are for,” he said. “Not for taking kids to soccer practice.”

Without seeing another person or vehicle, we drove through the kind of terrain 19th-century geologist and explorer John Wesley Powell wrote about: “*The landscape everywhere, away from the river, is of rock – cliffs of rock, tables of rock, plateaus of rock, terraces of rock, crags of rock... a whole land of naked rock, with giant forms carved on it...*”

In the hazy afternoon heat, we walked through a maze of narrow canyons to an overlook across Chesler Park, a panorama of rock spires, striped pink-white like nougat. Fast-moving clouds cast dramatic

shadows across the land. Other than the occasional drone of a passing fly, there was an absolute absence of noise.

Camp that night was a cave at the end of a long corridor of muffin-shaped rocks ominously known as Devil’s Kitchen. Utah has plenty of similarly evocative place names – Devil’s Backbone, Valley Of The Gods, Goblin Valley, Fiery Furnace – that were begrudgingly bestowed upon this tough land by the Mormon settlers and many cowboys who ranged (and lost) livestock here.

Camping out

Next morning, we took a gentle hike along the Red Lake Trail to rendezvous with the boat that would take us down the Colorado River. We walked through Cyclone Canyon past rocks shaped like giant shipwrecks and followed cairns along a dry riverbed that was

thick with tumbleweed. “You can tell this trail isn’t really used much,” noted Bill, master of understatement.

Dave, the boatman, met us close to the river and we spent the afternoon rafting through the rapids of Cataract Canyon, walled by 600m cliffs on either side. The force of the Colorado River pounded the raft, the churned brown water and white froth looking like the (rather tasty) local brew, Dead Horse Ale. After a night camped beside the Colorado River on Ten Cent Beach we ate a breakfast of eggs and pancakes – it doesn’t get much more American.

Downriver, we scrambled up a faint path to an old Anasazi Indian storehouse in the rock face. Nomadic tribes hid tools and seeds here while they moved around the country. It’s 2,000 years old, Dave estimated, and in remarkably good shape. “There are >

Red light district

The ragged rock landscapes of Canyonlands are spectacular viewed from Dead Horse Point

◀ storehouses everywhere around here. Hundreds of them we don't know about."

From our haul-out point at Hite, I drove up to Torrey (I had arranged for my car to be shuttled down to Hite – an extra cost, but a big time-saver, especially if your time is limited). The scenery kept getting grander: drifted dunes of black rock, high views over the Colorado River, open ranges where cattle roamed free and the Henry Mountains where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid used to hide out.

I was covering big distances, but driving these roads wasn't a chore. Occasionally I shared the highways with bikers or hulking haulage juggernauts, but mostly I had space and open road stretching into the blue. There are nuggets along Utah's roads waiting to be discovered: junkyards where classic old Fords and Chevys have been laid to rest; horses roaming in paddocks; galleries and studios of artists and photographers, drawn here by the light, shapes and colours of the landscape.

The drive from Torrey on to Escalante took in Scenic Byway 12, one of only 31 All-American Roads recognised by the US Department of Transport for their scenic or historic qualities. By the roadside, shy deer mingled among the bright yellow aspens of Dixie National Forest. As I continued south towards Grand Staircase-Escalante, the scenery opened out to vast panoramas of dunes in white, orange and salmon pink, the hanging early-morning mist yet to burn away.

The future's orange

I spent a day with Rick, a guide of 11 years, and a Canadian couple, hiking across Escalante's rock plateaus, paddling through shallow streams and navigating canyons. Rick scoured the ground for arrowheads,

tools and other Anasazi and Fremont Indian objects left in the area. Scratched into the canyon walls were the signatures of cowboys and explorers from the last century.

Here there were no trails and just four people. "All to ourselves, guys," said Rick, on a high overlook. "I bet there hasn't been a soul here since the cowboys left." He whooped "U-tah!" and the syllables echoed around the rock walls. He was excited. "The rock is beautiful today, after the rain. All cleaned up and looking pretty."

Rick and I went out again the next day with a group of Germans. The rock having had a chance to dry (it's dangerously crumbly when wet), we rappelled down a series of rock faces into a canyon, then worked our way slowly back out. The techniques learned the previous day meant I was able to move confidently around this unique rock environment. Solving each new challenge presented by the rock, whether tight walls or difficult climbs, was as addictive as a sudoku.

I drove on from Escalante, short on time, spoilt for choice. It seemed in any direction I pointed the nose of my car, I'd arrive at a national park, national monument or a place of remarkable natural beauty – the bright rock hoodoos (the tall, spindly rock formations) of Bryce Canyon; the verdant valley of Zion; the snow-framed amphitheatre of hoodoos at Cedar Breaks.

The pleasures of Utah's colourful landscapes aren't lost on the residents themselves, who have this grand, often bizarre, compelling scenery on their doorstep. As one local girl told me over an American-sized portion of pie at a diner outside Bryce, "Not many people can say they live in a place that has orange rock. And orange rock is cool." ■

UTAH'S BEST NATIONAL PARKS**BEST FOR... Taking in epic views**

➤ With its vast, winding canyons carved out of the rock by the Green and Colorado rivers, **Canyonlands** has views to rival – or even beat – the Grand Canyon. Convenient viewpoints line the park roads, or venture into the wilderness of the Needles or the Maze districts for dramatic vistas without the sound of a single car engine.

**BEST FOR... Checking out rock arches**

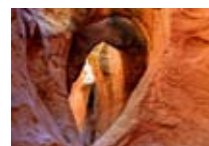
➤ To view the largest concentration of rock arches in the world, head to **Arches National Park** (where else?). Over 2,000 tall, wide, fat – and often precariously thin – arches sit alongside fins, spires and other oddities. The Devil's Garden loop and the easy walk up to Delicate Arch can get busy, especially during summer.

**BEST FOR... Photographing sunset and sunrise**

➤ The giant basins of hoodoos (tall, spindly rocks) in the popular, accessible and pleasantly strange **Bryce Canyon National Park** take on a fiery glow at dawn and dusk. Sunrise Point and Sunset Point make it pretty easy to find the best spots for pictures, although there are plenty of other, quieter viewpoints.

**BEST FOR... Leaving the crowds behind**

➤ The desert landscapes around the town of Escalante, in the vast **Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument**, are littered with relics from local Indian tribes and old-time cowboys. They're not here now; neither's anyone else. This is remote wilderness, perfect for pin-drop silent hiking.

**BEST FOR... A piece of heaven**

➤ The Mormons renamed one of the state's most beautiful and greenest areas as **Zion National Park**, Zion meaning 'the heavenly city of God' or 'place of refuge'. The adventurous can hike up Angel's Landing, but there are plenty of shorter, more sedate walks around the river valley.

